

Introductory Material

An Act to Cut and Clear a Waggon Road to the Settlements on the Cumberland River in the Mero District

On May 26, 1790, President George Washington signed into law an act of Congress passed earlier in the month that established the Territory of the United States South of the River Ohio (Southwest Territory). Embracing the western lands ceded by the state of North Carolina on December 22, 1789, the new territory was to be governed under the terms of the Ordinance of 1787, which created its predecessor, the Northwest Territory.

The extent of the new territory was well defined. Containing about 43,000 square miles of land, it was restricted to North Carolina's western district bounded on the north by the boundary of North Carolina and Virginia; on the west by a line in the middle of the Mississippi River, on the south by the parallel 35 degrees north and on the east by a jagged line running from the northeast to southwest connecting some dominant mountain peaks. It was this territory that in 1796 would become the state of Tennessee.

The new territory had two centers of population approximately 150 miles apart, separated by the Cumberland Mountains. The larger population, some 28,000, was in the eastern part of the territory in a corridor from 25 to 60 miles wide that extended from the Virginia line down the Holston River Valley about 110 miles to the southwest. Settlements were clustered along the Holston, Watauga, Nolichucky, French Broad and Little Rivers and their tributaries. The smaller Cumberland settlements of approximately 7,000 were located along an 80 mile stretch of the Cumberland River from Bledsoe's Lick in the east to Clarksville in the west. The Indians regarded settlements in the Cumberland area and in certain parts of the Holston Valley as encroachments on their territory.

In 1790, President Washington appointed North Carolina businessman, William Blount as territorial governor. Blount, a land speculator, had already claimed title to approximately one million acres of the land inside its boundaries. Blount was also given a second responsibility as Superintendent of Indian Affairs in the Southern Department, an office that placed him in contact with the neighboring Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee and Creek Nations. Relations with the latter two were so difficult that Blount had to devote more time to Indian matters than to the office of governor.

The first capital of the territory was the home of William Cobb, called Rocky Mount, in Washington County near the Watauga River. Governor Blount and Daniel Smith, a Mero District leader appointed by the President to be secretary of the territory, and acting governor in Blount's absence, set up the territorial office there in 1790. They relocated the capital to Blount's residence in the newly laid-out town of Knoxville in 1792. The three other principal offices of the government were Judges John McNairy, David Campbell and Joseph Anderson. Generals John Sevier and James Robertson commanded the militia of the Washington and Mero Districts, respectively. Before Blount's call for a general election in 1793, the judges and the governor constituted the representative body with authority to enact statutes.

The newly elected House of Representatives met in Knoxville on February 18, 1794, and nominated ten men (who had to own at least 500 acres) from whom President Washington subsequently appointed five to serve as members of the council, the upper

house of the legislative body. Subsequently, the first meeting of the two houses of the territorial assembly was held in August.

Although Governor Blount had been responsible for the postponement of representative government for the territory, he assumed the leadership of the movement for statehood. Unable to induce the federal government to adopt an aggressive Indian policy, Blount had become convinced that only as a state in the Union could the people of the Tennessee country protect their vital interests.

In 1795, a territorial census revealed a sufficient population for statehood, and a referendum showed a 6,504 to 2,562 majority in favor of joining the United States. Blount called for a constitutional convention and a democratic bill of rights. The voters chose John Sevier as governor, and the newly elected legislature voted for Blount and William Cocke as Senators, and Andrew Jackson as U.S. Representative. Tennessee leaders thereby converted the territory into a new state, with an organized government and constitution before applying to Congress for admission. Since the Southwest Territory was the first federal territory to present itself for admission to the United States, there was uncertainty about how to proceed, and due to party conflicts, Congress was slow to act on the statehood. Nonetheless, in a close vote on June 1, 1796, Congress approved the admission of Tennessee as the sixteenth state of the Union.

The act ordering a wagon road to the settlements in the Mero District was one of the varied acts passed by the territorial assembly. Admission to the Union as a state was not the only question before the general assembly. Responding weakly to the governor's request for assistance to pay for "the cutting and clearing" of a wagon road from Southwest Point to Bledsoe's Lick after the failure of a lottery for that purpose, the assembly diverted all monies that might be collected from the sale of public lands in Mero District to the use of the road commissioners. It is interesting to note that the land used for the road was coerced from the Cherokees thus causing a series of Creek and Cherokee raids into the district.

Works Consulted

Carter, Clarence Edwin, ed. *The Territorial Papers of the United States. Territory of the United States South of the River Ohio, 1790-1796* Vol. IV (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1936)

Durham, Walter T. *Before Tennessee: The Southwest Territory, 1790-1796*. (Piney Flats, Tennessee: Rocky Mount Historical Association, 1990)

Folmsbee, Stanley J., Robert E. Corlew and Enoch Mitchell. *Tennessee: A Short History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1969)

Henderson, Archibald. *The Conquest of the Old Southwest* (New York: The Century Company, 1920)